



Why Have So Many Veterans Been Involved In Extremist Organizations and In the January 6 Assault on our Capitol— and What Can Be Done

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Abstract

This commentary describes relevant military and post-military experiences related to why so many veterans participate in extremist organizations and were in the attack on our nation's Capitol. Factors include the conditioning that occurs in basic training, salient experiences as part of military culture and in war, post-military challenges vis-à-vis what is left behind peer support, mission-driven culture and frayed relationship with our government and society. Recommended actions are identified that we can take personally and as a society. The author, a social work officer on an Army psychiatric team in Vietnam, and director of several PTSD programs, has counseled hundreds of veterans from WWII to Iraq and Afghanistan since 1967.

Keywords: Veterans; Extremist Groups; Mental Health; Community Social Action; War Trauma.

Introduction

At one of my recent presentations about veterans, I was asked why I thought so many were involved in white supremacy and militant Christian organizations, and in the assault on our Capitol? This commentary describes compelling aspects of experiences in the military, war and post-war, related to this issue. Conversely, most American servicemembers and veterans both appreciate, and benefit, from many aspects of military experience and contribute significantly to family, community, country.

There is another side of the story. It begins in basic training: new recruits are taught to transition from civilian to warrior mentality and behaviors, to [1] deconstruct from the prevailing, pre-existing civilian mandate, oftentimes buttressed by Christian and religious teaching, “not to kill”; and [2] engage with the enemy, and if necessary maim and kill “in defense of our country.” There was a confounding duality: emphasizing winning the hearts and minds of the people in order to win a guerilla, non-conventional war; and conditioning tactics to dehumanize the enemy. It is important to convey, to those who have

not experienced it, the nature and extent of rampant denigrating, racist language and attitudes describing the Vietnamese I experienced this in our 1967 basic training. Vietnamese were referred to as “gooks,” “chinks,” “slopes,” “slant-eyes”... It is extremely harder to kill somebody’s spouse, sibling, child, parent, grandparent -- than to kill a “Jap,” a “gook,” a “haji.” Also, we were taught that Vietnamese were Buddhist, believed in reincarnation, and did not grieve about death and loss like we did (similarly applied more recently to troops being taught about enemy who are Muslims -- and, like Vietnamese, also “not White”). And there was rampant sexist (“bitch,” “cunt,” “you can’t hack it, little girl”...) and homophobic (“queer,” “faggot”...) language and prejudices. All such exposure was ingrained before arriving in the war-zone.

In the last 20 years, my counseling has increasingly involved Iraq (OIF) and Afghanistan (OEF) veterans. Not infrequently I hear slurs about Muslims, Iraqi’s, and Afghans (“sand N-word,” “haji”). Furthermore, for 50+ years I’ve counseled, and heard about, innumerable veterans who, tragically, have broadened or generalized their dehumanizing and prejudices. What started out directed at the people in the countries where deployed, becomes inclusive of most anyone of “Asian” or “A-rab” ancestry, and all “Moslems” ... Yet others manifest exemplary compassion and behaviors, respecting local peoples and cultures.

There has been a history of Confederate paraphernalia in ROTC and active duty units, Christian-themed “Crusaders” and “Fighting Knights” unit logos with crosses, neo-Nazi symbols on tattoos and articles of clothing, a very active evangelical sub-culture at the Air Force Academy. Over one-third of servicemembers report personally experiencing racist or white supremacist behavior -- perhaps partly related to many recruits being from conservative red states where both a gun culture and Confederate flag have been entrenched (<https://ffrf.org/outreach/item/13195-evangelicalism-is-the-official-religion-of-the-air-force-academy>; <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/24/politics/pentagon-report-white-supremacists/index.html>; Morris, 2021). Minority servicemembers describe personal negative race-related experiences prior to, while on active duty (i.e., being called racist slurs, discriminated against for promotions), and following discharge (S--- & Mackey, 2001).

An untold number of servicemembers enter the military with racist and extremist attitudes – perhaps more so in an all-volunteer military. Coupled with dehumanizing pre-war conditioning, practically everywhere that American combat troops have deployed since the Korean War have been countries where the enemy are people of color and predominantly non-Christian, i.e., Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Ethiopia ... It is easy to believe that such experiences reinforce pre-existing race-based attitudes, or negatively influence others on active duty and afterwards. (Conversely, other servicemembers displayed compassionate, exemplary actions to protect and benefit the welfare of the people and country deployed to.)

Let us put this into historical perspective. Racist-laden war-related attitudes and slurs happened during WWII about the Japanese (“Japs,” “yellow peril”). And, our country forcibly relocated some 120,000 Japanese Americans -- who were U.S. citizens -- to isolated internment camps. [In contrast, no German- or Italian-Americans were forcibly interned in camps.] Also, our nation’s history includes a long history of race-based discrimination against African-Americans, and

recent rise in attacks against Asian Americans. And, we have a 250+ year history where our country has waged some 80 different “American-Indian Wars” against indigenous non-Christian (“heathen”) Indian Nations (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Indian_Wars).

Servicemembers are inculcated with how weapons are instruments to support and carry-out the military mission. There is a profound triumvirate of combatant roles: as judge, jury and executioner. Some assume these roles prudently, courageously, compassionately; others traumatized, forever haunted by what they saw, and did. Still others take great liberties, reveling in the thrill of the kill – as both hunter and hunted. Add to this “combat cocktail” mixture the one emotion especially sanctioned in war – anger – and exacerbated during war by threats and losses (S---, 2004). Also, many veterans describe negative experiences of higher-level military command, and being treated as expendable (“cannon fodder”). Yet, through it all, the sustaining factor was the remarkable peer bonding within the small military unit. For many, the welfare of brother and sister comrades-in-arms was more important than anything else—indeed, oftentimes even more so than the mission.

Then we all come home, leaving behind the remarkably tight-knit peer bonds instrumental to our identity, to surviving, to thriving, and the mission-driven culture of the military, where missions are handed down by higher-level command to carry out. And, there is extremely minimal meaningful re-training to deconstruct entrenched military/combat-ingrained attitudes and behaviors. Even so, most do well post-militarily, and value their military-related experiences, maturation and relationships. Others bring home anguish and rage: over the loss of buddies, their treatment by the military, families’ sacrifices back home, physical and/or emotional injuries incurred.

Yes, wars always come home – not infrequently in the form of veterans with PTSD. Being alienated and not trusting society can leave veterans vulnerable to exploitation by charismatic authority figures. Many veterans sorely miss their small-unit band of brothers and sisters, lack marketable job skills, actively recruited by extremist groups like the Oath Keepers, Boogaloo Boys (Morris, 2020), Three Percenters, Proud Boys. Ironically, while more recently radicalized veterans have been attracted to the Far Right, radicalized Vietnam veterans were drawn to the anti-war movement of the political Left.

Also, a frequent experience in my counseling with hundreds of veterans from WWII through OIF and OEF: too many describe returning to a place, people and institutions that do not think or care much at all, nor have any understanding about, their sacrifices (and that of their families) and price paid in service to their country. That “our government sends us to war, our military uses us in war, and our country forgets us after war” (S---, 2006, 2020).

“To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.” Abraham Lincoln’s noble 1865 articulation of this life-long commitment by our country, is experienced by too many as promises broken in terms of recognition and attending to oftentimes life-long physical and emotional injuries incurred. Depression, resentment, alienation, rage can become intermixed with being “somewhat lost” post-militarily: alone, and no assigned mission anymore.

Such isolated, “mission-less” veterans can feel adrift, cast aside, betrayed by a military, government and society perceived as just “not giving a damn” about them. Also, a number of veterans view Democrats as anti-military, anti-veteran, anti-Second Amendment,

anti-law enforcement, anti-American, socialists. Such can motivate being apolitical. Or, issues about entrenched political incumbents, big government telling us what we can do and not do...“drain the swamp” resonates and attraction to “alternative” political organizations such as MAGA (Morris, 2021). And there is a radicalized element of angry, disaffected veterans who can be attracted to all sorts of tight-knit organizations: motorcycle clubs, gangs, white supremacists, antifa, QAnon... Such offer “a replacement mission,” an explanation, a “place of belonging,” a shared affinity for weapons; tapping into anger, angst and prejudices infused with the threats of non-Christians, non-whites, immigrants, DACA, illegal aliens, refugees, border security, “the Kung Flu”.

Finally, too many veterans perceive our society and system as basically clueless about, let alone appreciative of, servicemembers/veterans and their families’ sacrifices during and following active duty. Many veterans bear some of the blame for this: we strongly tend to shut out even our own family members, and share important aspects of our military experiences only with other veterans.

What To Do?

“Wood already touched by fire is not hard to set alight.” African Proverb (Bokor, n.d.). It all begins with me and you, our willingness to engage in constructive interactions with those holding strongly held convictions different from ours. Ultimately, such efforts might promote dialogue to understand the positions of those with starkly different convictions. And, we absolutely must commit to non-violence -- in thoughts, words, emotions and actions. This is congruent with the Buddhist concept that (inner and outer) peace is a way of life, living mindfully in the present moment. If we dissolve the rage within, there are no seeds for violence to grow.

Similarly, Dr. Martin Luther King’s exhortation to civil rights activists reverberates still: the nonviolent civil rights resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent, he also refuses to hate him (S---, 2019). . Difficult, indeed, it is to love thy “enemy.” Even so, it all begins from within. As the Dalai Lama said, “The real destroyer of our peace of mind isn’t an external weapon or enemy, but our own destructive emotions.” Indeed, that our enemy or someone hostile can become the teacher of our practicing patience in a way that no one else can (Lama, 2020).

Thich Nhat Hanh, in concert with the above, emphasized that non-violence is the essence of political responsiveness, and that the essence of non-violence is love. Indeed, that “strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally.” It is the awareness of suffering, nurtured by love, that “is the most effective way to confront adversity” (Hanh, 2019, p. 69). Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that “You cannot prefabricate techniques of nonviolent action and put them into a book for people to use. That would be naïve.” He emphasized that being “alert and creative,” and having the essence of non-violence and compassion within yourself, naturally moves you in the direction of non-violence (Ibid, p. 75).

In my experience, and to my way of thinking, the perspective briefly identified above is the challenge before us, and the necessary guidepost, for each of us to be able to interact constructively with those who hold starkly opposing viewpoints to our own. This includes veterans interacting with other veterans of different if not opposing viewpoints.

Other Considerations

*Veterans deserve meaningful, regular recognition of their service by local communities and country -- and not just a parade on November 11th. Why not the 11th day of every month be Veterans Day?

*We have much to learn from Warrior Recognition Ceremonies that Indian Nation warrior tribes hold for their veterans, and healing rituals, i.e., sweat lodge, Talking Circle (John Wilson, 2013) and creative ceremonies such as quilts and pillow-pals embroidered specifically for individual veterans, provided in community-based recognition ceremonies that involve welcoming by civilians and veterans of prior eras. Indeed, "It takes a village to heal veterans, and it takes veterans to teach the village how." (Sherrill Valdes, 2013).

*Primary and secondary school teachers, and college faculty, need to invite veterans to regularly speak and integrate their war/post-war experiences, i.e., with history, psychology, social sciences., literature, visual and performing arts...

*VA facilities, traditional Veterans Service Organizations and veteran non-profits need to prioritize training of veteran buddy volunteer systems, pairing more with less well-functioning veterans.

*Places of worship and spiritual centers need to invite veterans to give talks and interact. Many veterans found faith-based or moral beliefs essential to their survival, both then and now; others have had moral anguish about their war experiences, finding their beliefs sorely tested—or shattered.

*Professional health and mental health organizations need to require several hours of veteran-related educational offerings for licensure reissuance.

*Each of us must rethink how we personally can serve, honor, appreciate, learn from those who have served, i.e., pay it forward, pick up the tab at a restaurant, or in the neighborhood store checkout line, for an active duty military or veteran (identified perhaps by a uniform, T-shirt logo, hat, or specialty plate on his/her vehicle). Brain-storm with others about how communities can honor and appreciate veterans and their families – beyond November 11th. And genuinely, personally thank servicemembers and veterans for their service (almost all truly appreciate such, even if we don't say that we do...).

Recognize. Reach out to servicemembers, veterans, their families. Remember: the price of freedom truly is not free. That is why too many veterans are lacking what was the motto of our 98th Medical Detachment psychiatric team in Nha Trang. It was prominently displayed on a large, brightly painted sign, next to the entrance to what was my duty station at our Mental Hygiene Clinic: a likeness of Snoopy, lying on a couch, with the alluring words underneath -- pax mentis (peace of mind).

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